BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Gladys Crampton

I had the fortune of meeting a very prominent Black artist, Ben Britt, and I began to study with him. Then all the energy of "Black is Beautiful," came out. Do red, black, and green [Afro-American flag colors]. Blacks became aware of their heritage. And they were proud. They were no longer ashamed of their wide noses, their thick lips, or their hair. They found out who they were. And as me working in the field of education, I wanted to have some part of helping them mold it. And the only way that I saw was between the dance and with the aesthetics, values, because we were never taught that in school.

Gladys Crampton, daughter of Emma and Glennwood Crampton, Sr., was born in 1931. She attended schools in the Philadelphia area and was brought up in the Allen A.M.E. Church. She studied at the Philadelphia Art League and Letcher's School of Art in Washington, D.C.

Crampton worked as a professional model in the 1950s and worked as an art/dance specialist with the department of recreation in Philadelphia.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Gladys E. Crampton (GC)

June 30, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is an interview with Gladys E. Crampton, June 24, 1988 [in Honolulu]. Interviewed by Kathryn Waddell Takara.

Gladys, maybe you can tell me a bit about where you were born, and when; about your home life when you were very young, as much as you can remember; who your mother and father were, and what you see as their strengths and influences in your life.

GC: I was born [in 1931] and raised in Philadelphia, west Philadelphia. My mother and father were Glennwood and Emma Crampton, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My mother's people were basically educators. I attended Barry Elementary School in west Philadelphia, Holmes Junior High School, (and Overbook High School).

KT: When you were a young child, who were the most important influences in your family? Say, what was a family day like in your earliest days of memory?

GC: Sundays in church.

KT: Hm mm.

GC: Do you ask the question?

KT: Can you talk about, a little bit about the church in your community, the role of the church, if it had a significant role?

GC: I think all Black churches in Philadelphia had a very, very strong role in the development of the communities [when] I came up. I'm fifty-seven years old. And so therefore, my molding years were in the '30s and the '40s. I was brought up in Allen A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Church in south Philadelphia where Mother Bethel and all the prominent Black churches [were] the strength of the Black community, so every Sunday, you were in church.

KT: And that is everybody was in church, the whole family? Not just the children in Sunday school?

GC: No, the whole family went to church as a unit. And afterwards it was always visiting the grandparent's home.

KT: Okay. And would this be typical of most families, you would say, at that period of time?

GC: Yes, very much so.

KT: That the church and the family were both strong influences . . .

GC: Very much so.

KT: Do you remember your grandparents at all? Were they living at that time? Would you spend time with them and where would you spend time with them and how?

GC: My mother's mother [Laura Waters] lived in (south) Philadelphia so I was with her several days a week. My father's people were in Scranton, [Eleanor and John Wesley Crampton] my grandparents, so I always saw them in the summertime.

KT: And can you tell me a little bit about what they were like? Were they role models for you? Did they offer you counsel, or discipline, or just love? Or did they cook special things? How were they to you? How do you remember them?

GC: Both of them were---I was particularly fond of my mother's mother. She's a very tall, strong person. Anything she ever taught you had a lesson behind it. I had a very closely knit family and so we just shared. During the time that I came out, mostly I was around the Black educators that came out of Tuskegee [Institute], Central State, Howard University, Morgan [State College,] (and University of Pennsylvania). And at that particular time, [because of] racial prejudice that was going on--for a lack of a better way to put it, that was going on--the Black community stayed to their selves. And during that period of time, in the early--I guess in the '30s, that's all I can speak of--most of the Blacks lived in South Philadelphia and towards, I guess towards the end of the depression they started moving out of south Philadelphia to west Philadelphia. But everyone that basically you were in contact with, like I said, were the educators from the Negro colleges and at that time they were Negro colleges, they were not Black colleges. So therefore, when it came up to summer, what is called programs now they (had) to keep the children off the street and just don't have someone there to guide and mold their lives, the older people in the community all joined forces with that.

KT: And watch the young people?

GC: Guide them. I don't think it was necessarily watch them as it was to guide them and mold them and get their strengths in them and take time because it was a personal interest. At that time, if someone saw you doing something wrong, they could correct you, and then you

would pray that they didn't come back home and tell your father or your parents or you didn't get double discipline in on it.

KT: So can you remember sitting down and talking to some of the older people in the community, would it be that? Or would it only be a reprimand? Would it be also you would sit down and maybe have a glass of tea or lemonade? Or. . . .

GC: No, you were---I don't know. I really couldn't remember how to answer that because your activities were usually planned with the groups that you were going to be with. You were given a free range. So when anything was pointed out that you needed to know, I don't think it was too much being constantly reprimanded for anything in particular that you did. It was usually words of wisdom that guided. It was an awful lot of love and sincere interest.

KT: But where would you see the old folks?

GC: Well, they would usually be the supervisors or what have you. Like if it was the camp or (on the front porch). During the time I came up it was (summer bible school at church Monday to Friday in the summer).

KT: What? Camps?

GC: Yes, some are [Methodist] church camps going up in the Poconos to the church camps, or some of the Jack-and-Jill clubs. You know, like in the '50s or '60s, the Episcopalian churches basically started having the teen dances. So that's why it was always supervised, so therefore it wasn't always, "Come over here and let me sit down and tell you something."

KT: Mm hmm, I see what you're saying.

GC: Or the Pyramid Club in (Philadelphia,) Pennsylvania which was a private club of the professionals, Black professionals. So therefore, most of your activities on Saturdays were at the Pyramid Club, or church functions, or picnics.

KT: In terms of employment, you lived in Philadelphia, which is considered an East Coast city, and yet you mentioned in passing that there [were] still problems of segregation and racial problems that existed then. What was the extent to which people crossed into each other's worlds in the '30s, '40s, '50s, that you were in Philadelphia that you can remember?

GC: I don't quite understand what you mean when you say "into people's, crossed in other worlds" . . .

KT: All right, you said people kind of stuck together. What I mean, so if you were a doctor, for example, or if you were a teacher, then you would be employed in a predominantly Black institution?

GC: Not necessarily, no. Like the elementary school I went to, I do not remember having any Black teachers at all. In fact, I know there were no Black teachers. Because basically, when we moved from south Philadelphia to west Philadelphia, there weren't that many Negroes living in west Philadelphia. When I say "clannish" it was more or less the social circles. I went to art school [Philadelphia Art League] on Saturdays, but I went in an Italian neighborhood, so [I was] kidded, you know, [about] that as a crossing over. I wouldn't call it so much a crossing over as I would say another experience. You know, you going over, like I went to the art museum on Saturdays, or the Philadelphia Art League on Saturdays, which was in a--Philadelphia Art League was in an Italian neighborhood. In fact, this neighborhood in which [former Mayor Frank] Rizzo was brought up. Most of the children's grandparents don't even speak English. But I think when you're older, when you get into the realm of anything of the arts, I think that is one time that the culture, the whole racial thing sort of is low-key, because the central focus of the interest is on the art, so you're not coming in too much contact with any personal things. And particularly doing it, you know, in your younger years.

KT: The effects of the depression were felt all the way, I guess, up until the Second World War. Do you recall hearing any of the adults talk about the depression when you were growing up? Did it affect a lot of people in Philadelphia, in particular, or not in your community? Or what?

GC: I have absolutely no recall of any of that. The only thing, as I became older and I could reflect back, then I saw how the strengths of Blacks as a family unit were at that time, because when one--because during that period of time, most of the teachers, in order to be qualified just had to come out of normal school.

KT: What's that, normal school?

GC: Normal school, obviously, was your training to, what they would call, I guess now (are called) accelerated courses, which qualified you to teach. Then the standards of teaching began to rise, then you had to go in and get more credits in order to be qualified to teach. So then, as, you know, in '30s and '40s, Blacks had larger families than they do now. So, when one came out of school and they were financially able, they helped the others. It was really a strong family structure unity that they helped each other.

KT: How did you develop your interest in art? You spoke of going to art school at a fairly early age. When did you start going to art school and how did that interest kind of develop?

GC: Truthfully, I don't remember. I've just been drawing as long as I can remember. In elementary school, mostly it started with modeling with clay, as I can recall it. I remember in about the fifth or sixth grade, the first art lesson I remember is the lesson in actual balance, I still remember it. So I became very interested in

design, which was just basically drawing 'cause in elementary school, you're not doing anything but drawing with crayons. When I started junior high school, doing posters and what have you, I won a scholarship to The Art Institute [Philadelphia Art League].

KT: And how did your family feel about your leaning towards art?

GC: It was fine, as long as it was a Saturday, it was a culture thing. I always attended the (Philadelphia Art Museum and the) [Philadelphia Art League]. They have children's (art) forum programs. So it was something (to do) other than sitting up in the movies all the time, so no one ever thought that anything would ever come of it, (as) most children when they start out. I just kept on drawing and painting. I was always in my own happy world and doing it.

KT: What about when people were sick? I think you've mentioned that some people in your family were doctors, physicians. Were there any kind of folk remedies within the Black community or within your own family, that you can remember, that also were used or were effective?

GC: Well, I think in all healing, the main prescription for healing is love. People had time then. You weren't functioning in a world of technology. There was wisdom. When I look back and I think of how psychology and group therapy is being used today, in comparison, [with] what was going on during that period of time, if you were told to stay in the bed, you stayed in the bed. I used to think my parents knew more to do with an onion than anybody else on the face of the earth. But there aren't any outstanding ones. Probably if I had time to really think about it, I could surface. But one of my them, one I will always remember are onions that were made into poultices, or mixed for fever. One I do remember is taking real cheap white bread, if you had a high fever, they would take 'em and put 'em on the soles of your feet and put socks over it and it really worked. Your fever would be broken in the morning. And when you took that bread out it looked like toast. (Chuckles)

KT: That's interesting.

GC: And of course, there was sassafras tea which they used to sell on the corners, but in the last twenty or thirty years, the AMA [American Medical Association] board said that it had poison in it and they took it off the market, but for years you could buy bundles of it on the corner.

KT: So then, when did you leave Philadelphia? Did you leave Philadelphia or you stayed in Philadelphia?

GC: No, I left Philadelphia for a short period in 1949. I was in art school in Washington, D.C.

KT: And what did you study there and under whom did you study?

GC: Letcher's School of Art. I (studied) there for a while, I wanted to get into commercial art, but the fickle hand of fate just didn't let it go that way, so I was only in Washington, D.C. for about a year and a half and then returned back to Philadelphia.

Our father [Glennwood (W.) Crampton, (Sr.)] got called into service [the reserves] in '52, so my (step)mother (Irene W. Crampton) would have been home by herself, so I had to return to Philadelphia. My father had played with the city transportation band [PTC: Philadelphia Transportation Co.], the Elks band, and the United States Army band in the reserves. So he got called, in fact, into the music unit.

KT: What instrument did he play?

GC: Trombone.

KT: Was he also interested in jazz?

GC: No.

KT: No.

GC: No, he never played jazz.

KT: Did you notice the influence of jazz or blues, or any other particular type of music within the community as you were growing up?

GC: Of course, the choirs from the Black churches. The St. Matthew Methodist Church, and Mt. Carmel Baptist. Vice versa. I'm not sure which ones they are, but both of them. And I always enjoyed hearing the rich Black voices singing the Negro spirituals. It always seemed---it was always such a radiant energy, (I) like to sit in church and hear the choir sing and come in with their robes, their energy, and the strength that came forth from it. That was my first impression of our music and our churches. We're not talking about tambourines.

Or, I think the other strong memory is everybody made hot bread on Sunday morning in the '30s and the '40s, so you always had your breakfast (and hear) Wings Over Jordan Choir, which I'm sure, you know, young adults now, Black adults, I'll say, in their thirties, don't even know who the Wings Over Jordan Choir are. You can't even get hold of the records anymore. Basically, that's where the energy of Patti LaBelle and all those come from because they all are ex-members (of church choirs) or they were raised and brought up in those churches in Philadelphia. An awful lot of your Black entertainers come out of Philly. [Like] Aretha Franklin [from Detroit], it's that same kind of energy. The words are different, but the bottom line is release and love. And I think they still project that with their singing.

A lot of the jazz--I don't know if you went by some of the small storefront churches in Philadelphia--the, what are they called? For a lack of a better name because we used to call them Holy Rollers. They're not called that anymore.

KT: Evangelists, huh?

GC: Evangelists, yeah. Now that---you know, you can see the influence of the jazz like that would come from New Orleans or those that were from around that part of the country who moved north.

KT: And would that be because of the [musical] instruments that were used? Or. . . . Why would you say there was something distinguishing about the Black musical, the jazz, that would make it different from anybody else's music?

GC: You mean in the churches or in reference to the Holy Rollers?

KT: Both.

GC: Well, in the churches, it was just basically just, in the Methodist or the Baptist churches, it was just piano and the choir singing. When I pointed out the Holy Roller churches, you're talking about tambourines and drums. So therefore, it makes the energy different. And the piano, and the tambourines, and the drums in the storefront churches makes it a decided difference than from, you know, from the regular norms, so to speak of, you know, of Congregational churches.

KT: Do you want to speak a little bit about the Black magazines and your role, actually, and as Miss--was it Black Sepia or Miss Sepia?

GC: No, no. Sepia means brown and it wasn't Black before the '60s. And this---what do you mean in reference to the magazine?

KT: Well, in terms of were you aware, number one, of magazines like Jet and Ebony? Or whatever there happened to be around . . .

GC: Well, Jet and Ebony, I believe, were the only two that were out in the '50s. I thought that Jet was very unique into itself because it covered the major Black cities, like Chicago, New York, Philadelphia. And of the entertainment world, the records, a very small magazine. But I always thought it was well documented. They used to have very small capsule articles that would really inform. That's why, Ebony, it was unique because it was the first time that we had had a magazine that was specifically our own, that let the Black community know [subjects that] Life magazine did not feel as though was very interesting nationwide. And it's now, 1988, one of the major publications throughout the world. It's not even just limited to the United States.

KT: How did you become involved in the Miss Sepia competition?

GC: It was purely by an accident. It was. My name had been turned in

to enter the Miss Sepia contest and I didn't want to go. My life was art. I wasn't too interested in modeling. And it's just one of those things that the fickle hand of fate had something to direct, and I ended up winning. So it was an experience in many, many ways.

KT: What did that mean to you at that period of time in your life?

GC: Oh, I think all young--how old was I, twenty or twenty-one--young adults that age--have all kind of ideas in their head, [which] runs outside of their neighborhoods, or what (they think they knew best). And I had entertained the thought about modeling, but after I did it for a while I didn't, didn't particularly care for it.

KT: And, could you speak a little bit as to what you didn't care for?

GC: I didn't like how people accepted you because you were a model. They seemed to think that you were just about partying and being someone to show off, to be with, there was no depth. They never saw beyond the beauty. They never saw you as an individual. They just saw you as someone pretty to have on their arm, and I thought I was about a little bit more than that.

KT: What were the possibilities for Black models in the '50s? I know that nowadays it is common or not uncommon to see a Black model on the cover of Vogue or [of] some of your fashion magazines. Was it like that when you were coming up?

GC: Well, I think the first Black models that came out in the '50s, all the young Black models on those covers today owe a lot of just due respect to that first crew of Black models that came out. I believe the beer companies, Smith's, Miller High Life, some of the hairdressing (companies). As Ebony came into view, the Apex [hairdressing company], some of the hair pomade companies started using [Black models]--right now, some of the names slipped my head, but Levonia Porter, Gail (Fisher, Mae) Madrid, myself, Dorothea Towers, are those that led (the) first. But what the difference was, when they first started out nationally using Black models, they tried to find those that had more of a Caucasian look [rather] than those that were Black, (one) you could tell that they were (pure) Black. And it caused a conflict within the Black models themselves because those who were very striking, who were very dark, it started (a) conflict. "I'm not getting it [modeling assignment] because I'm not light enough."

KT: So the subtleties of color made their way into the community just in terms of who could get what jobs when it came to . . .

GC: It wasn't so much the community as it was the large markets. The corporations were concerned how they felt as though who rather that they'd wanted, you know, to represent them. So at that time, "Black was not beautiful," so that answers that all the way across the board.

KT: When you were chosen to be Miss Sepia, were you a resident of Philadelphia then?

GC: Yes.

KT: And then after that term was over, what did you do?

GC: I modeled for a while, professionally, in New York. Because after the Miss Sepia, I placed for Miss New York Press Photographer. So that was about two-and-a-half straight years of (modeling professionally)--at that time it was when they start doing (Black) fashion shows. (As) you know, it was photography for national companies. But a lot of fashion modeling came up, which was really the seed of how the Ebony fashion shows started. It was all these different groups. And then they formed the one group of the traveling show, the Ebony fashion models who (had) the striking Black (models). When I say "Black," I'm using it as an overall term for the whole Negro race.

KT: So after your modeling career, did you go back into the art at that point? Or did you go another direction?

GC: No, I was working with [the] Department of Recreation in Philadelphia teaching arts, and arts and crafts, and dance.

KT: And who would you be working with?

GC: The children in the community (inner city).

KT: Would you go to other communities besides your community? Or you would be based out of west Philadelphia?

GC: No. When the programs began in the early '60s, it was a project that was started within the Department of Recreation called Project Human Renewal. And (the recreation staff) were sent into [the] inner city. Now inner city could be the Black neighborhoods, Irish, or Polacks, or anything quote, unquote, that was ghetto. These programs were set up so our heaviest programs were during the summer months because we always functioned to do our strongest programs when school is closed. And then in the winter months, it would be afterwards, you know, after school was out.

KT: You speak of the early '60s, and when we think of the '60s we think of a period of fermentation and new ideas and change and revolution and growth. Did you see any of these manifestations in the youth that you were working with at that time? Were they aware? Did they benefit, etc., except from the changes that were in the air?

GC: Oh, I think most definitely they benefited in many aspects. Now it was at this point when communities (developed Black awareness). It was in the '60s that the riots and the Blacks start screaming for their rights, and a lot of the programs were developed. Again, they were basically started off by the Black educators in the communities

who were writing proposals, taking them to Washington in order to get funded.

Project Human Renewal was a federally funded project that worked under or in conjunction with the Department of Recreation. And it was from that project, I guess it was about 1964, 1965, to bring all communities together. Not back together, but to bring them together. The Irish, the Polacks, the Hispanics, the Blacks. A camping program was set up, which meant the churches--Project Human Renewal worked in conjunction with the churches, they [already] had their summer camps and what have you. And we started busing approximately 1,200 people out of the city there. The aim of the program was to get the children off the streets and out of the city, keep the riots from coming out. And they went to a camp in upstate Pennsylvania (Camp Larchwood). They all left---the buses left on Fridays at 6:00 [p.m.] and they would return on Sunday. Over the weekend we would have a full recreation program for them. Arts and crafts, dance, social events, nature lore studies, so that they could have a total camping experience, because many of those children had never even been to downtown Philadelphia. So there (were buses from Philadelphia to Camp Larchwood), tents were put up (for) them to bring family together as a unit. And they went every weekend and they took them by different sections of Philadelphia and bused (fifty-two miles) outside of Philadelphia.

KT: When you say "family," you mean not only the children would go but sometimes the parents would go . . .

GC: No, the children could not go alone. They had to go (as a family unit)---the only way that they would be qualified to go up for the weekend, we supplied the tents and the food. (But) they had to go as a family unit. A child could not go alone. So it was bringing the family together and creating activities. The city government was planning those (events) in that period of time as I just referred to earlier.

During the '30s when I came up, the educators, the Black educators in the community, did (this) alone. I mean, even if it were during the winter, people made wine then. So, you were around and it was always a lot going on in the house because all your mother's friends were getting together to make wine for (the) year, for the next year, or they made soda pop. And it was part of your job to help clean the bottles and dry 'em. So therefore, it was a family thing, so you hear and you absorb, opposed to someone actually standing up to you and say, "One and one makes two. And in order to do this you had to do that." But they had the wisdom of how to project to you without it being a whole lot of a verbal conversation. That's why I find it difficult just to pull out and say the things that were taught to you. You know, like I can say an onion [medical remedy] off the top of my head, but as you stop and you think, it has been ingrained in you so deeply till you just automatically respond.

Where[as] in those children that came up in the '60s, they didn't

have that. When television came in the '40s, it removed the heart of the Black home. They had an expansion of a world that they knew absolutely nothing about. And they got into that television. Where in an era of time where I came up, it was making bread. You were sitting around the women when they were making the bread, they would talk story, you would hear things. So it was that type of a tightly knit thing that was within the family itself, people baking pies and cakes. And then all of a sudden, everyone just started sitting in front of the television, and no one was talking to anyone anymore. So then . . .

KT: Communication went out.

GC: That's right. So communications went out, so then it became part of a group, like the Department of Recreation (had) set up these things. But yes, I did see a lot of good coming. I remember one particular kid. I would go into my office in the afternoon. And I always noticed he was always running out. And I would look around and nothing was ever missing. And I asked him a couple times what he was doing in there and he'd give some little silly answer. And, like I said, I never missed anything. And one day, he must have meant to throw something in the wastebasket and it missed. And I went to pick it up and I opened it. And it was one of the most fantastic drawings I had ever seen. The kid was about ten years old. And afterwards, I asked him about his drawing. He said, "Aw, Miss Crampton, I can't do that (attend art classes)."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because everybody will think I'm a faggot."

I said, "Why would everyone think you're a faggot because you're drawing?"

He said, "Well, you know, whenever any men draw, they're 'funny.'"

And I said, "Well, how would you like to take a Saturday and go around to some of the art places with me? The museums?" I didn't say "museums" purposely. I said "places." And he was all up about it, so I picked him and his little buddy up that I knew had been drawing together, and we went to the Philadelphia Art Museum. So I was going through, explaining the different pieces to him. And I was explaining who Van Gogh was because he was looking at the sunflowers. And noticed this head to the side and eyebrows all knitted. And I asked him what was the matter.

He said, "Not only are artists faggots, they're crazy."

I said, "Why are they crazy?"

He said, "Well, you have to be crazy to cut off your ear."

And I said to myself, "Gladys, if you don't say the right thing now,

you're going to lose a little artist." I said, "You know, it's true that Van Gogh did cut off his ear. But there are a lot of other people in the world that cut off their ears, and the only reason why you heard about Van Gogh cutting off his ear is because he did something special. And whatever you do, (something) special, they're going to make a mountain out of a molehill. Just happens to be one of the intricate things that he did. But that does not make him a faggot. Nor does it make him crazy."

So we left there. And the Rodin Museum is right down from the Philadelphia Art Academy. And of course, Rodin's very masculine and he was just in awe, when he saw (Rodin's work). I'll never forget this particular kid. I starts out, "Okay, I'll tell you what you do. You're going to come in here one hour before the program starts and Miss Crampton will give you an art lesson." And we did that for a long time. And I used to bring him up to the house for weekends.

And finally I walked in one day, and my patience was a little short, and I fussed with him about a color. And in the process of fussing on him about a color, it dawned on me that this kid is color-blind. So we worked out a system so he could tell what colors were what, you know. And I told him, "You know, you're really at an advantage, not at a disadvantage because you're color-blind. Because you're seeing (reds and blue) in intensity of color, since you can't see anything in (those) colors." That kid graduated from Pratt Institute in the '70s and is doing well.

These are just one of numerous tales that I could relay of what did come (from inner city programs and Project Human Renewal). You heard so much negativity about government waste with those federal programs and, true, there was waste, but I really don't think that they really brought to light all the good that came out of those programs. I know that they did in Philadelphia because, again, the leaders or the administrators of that program were those that came up during the period of time I did. You know, they were just beginning to have the Black teachers into the schools, so it was a different kind of strength. The Black kid that came up in the '30s or '40s automatically said "Yes, ma'am," and "No, ma'am" to any older Black pillar of the community. And they realized, the teachers in return realized, the odds and the pressure these kids were under so they took the time with them like those before (them), like their mothers had taken the time to mold them to be in a position they're in. So, a lot of them left, out of teaching and went into recreation because they knew the city. They had worked in the educational system, they knew where they were lacking. So, an awful lot of energy was poured into it.

And then as the OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] programs and all of those started to develop, it opened up a lot of channels. A lot of kids that had dropped out of school, they were able to do the work-school programs, get their degrees. Then, they came into the programs as aides, they wanted to make more money. They went to

Temple [University]. Temple was instrumental also with a lot of programs, summer programs, that Temple University (offered). So I saw a lot of good come out of those summer programs.

And it was great working with them. It did a lot for stimulus for my art, because during that particular time, the haves and the have-nots, as far as Blacks were concerned, were brought together, wherein the Jack-and-Jill Club members [upper class] never bothered with those of the sandlot crews. So even if they went in as counselors, it was the first time that Blacks were able to communicate or had a reason to communicate with those from the other side of the tracks. So therefore, another gap was closed. It opened a lot of magic doors for a lot of kids on both sides. It let them know that they weren't sitting on the shelf above anyone else. They were there to help each other.

KT: Very interesting. I'd like to talk some about your art now [painting]. For those people who are familiar with your art, although you do a variety of different mediums and different subjects, some of your strongest art has been your Black art. And I'd like to know how that particular development occurred.

GC: Well, to say the least, there was a little conflict within my own family about me going into art. So from, oh say from about 1950 to about 1963, I didn't do too much painting other than for my own personal enjoyment. When I started working inner city working with the kids, with the African dance programs, it began to stimulate a curiosity within me. I saw the needs. I can sit down and reflect [on] the strengths that I got from my home, my grandparents, and all those that I was around. So I didn't need any visual concepts. I saw it functioning in front of my eyes every day. After I started working with the [Philadelphia Department of] Recreation, I saw (for the) most (part), the largest percentage of these children didn't have that. I was a program specialist. [While] developing backdrops for a lot of my events I really began to get into our culture. (So I) scratch a little deeper. And each time I went, another experience. So, developing exhibits at the art museum and setting them up and then it just came.

I had the fortune of meeting a very prominent Black artist, Ben Britt, who has about five paintings hanging in [the] Tuskegee Negro Hall of Fame, liked my work, and I began to study with him. Then all the energy of "Black is beautiful" came out. "Do red, black and green [Afro-American flag colors]." Blacks became aware of their heritage. And they were proud. They were no longer ashamed of their wide noses, their thick lips, or their hair. They found out who they were. And as me working in the field of education, I wanted to have some part of helping them mold it. And the only way that I saw was between the dance and with the aesthetics, values, because we were never taught that in school. No Black anywhere in the United States was ever taught the truth of their heritage. They were always taught about the slaves, Little Black Sambo, everything that was negative. We were never taught our truths (and strengths).

KT: I'm going to stop just for a minute and turn the tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: We'll continue with this interview. You spoke of the dance. How did you become involved with the dance aspect?

GC: I had taken dance as a child. And dance is just always been part of me. For health reasons, it could never be executed. But as the '60s went on, I started going into Haiti and I would do an exchange [with] Levonia (Williams). Levonia, who at one time danced with Katherine Dunham, had set up school in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. And a lot of the Howard University and a lot of the Black schools were sending down exchange students. So I would go over to Levonia's school and give modern and jazz in exchange for a Haitian dance lesson. I did that, I guess, for about seven years, one week out of every year. So therefore, then I was able to just almost automatically and with some study, (able to) pick up on the African dance. And you can't study the dance of any culture unless you begin to study the culture itself. So in the process of reading the books and what have you, it opened up a lot of doors for me. Most of the group from Alvin Ailey's original group came out of the departments of recreation between Philadelphia and New York. Those are the same youngsters that their children now are dancing all over the world with Alvin Ailey, another good example of what Project Human Renewal, all the federally funded programs that came out of that period of time did. Otherwise, those kids wouldn't be going all over the world to this day.

KT: So, did you have a studio where you would paint? Or would you paint in your bedroom? How did that work out?

GC: Well, when I was working with recreation, at first--'cause I was bringing a lot of projects home to work with--so my nephew built me a drawing board. All homes in Philadelphia have basements. So, I was just basically doing some work in the basement. And then that's when Ben Britt came into my life, and then I utilized his studio for a long time. And then eventually I used one of the bedrooms in my home for a studio, so all the rest of it is history.

KT: Did you recognize the influence, for example, that studying under a great master would have on your own work. Did you feel a sense of destiny by this time that you were going to be an artist?

GC: I knew I wanted to. No, there was no feel at all of destiny because I was always very hesitant as to what could be done with it. It just seemed to unfold. Yes, I learned to live. That's, again, that's what I mean when I say that the Black educators in Philadelphia have a unique way of their own in instilling in you

without lecturing. And it isn't particularly talking story that they do. For example, one day I wanted to (paint bricks), I was doing a painting that had bricks in the background. And I couldn't bring into focus how to draw bricks. This is a very easy question to answer if you once stop to think about it. But Britt sent me outside to walk up and down Germantown Avenue, where all the Germans lived in Philadelphia at one time, so naturally everything's a lot of brick. And when I came back I felt as though I could lay bricks. So therefore, that's what I mean when I say things weren't told to you. You were given direction. And whatever direction that you were given to do any specific thing, you could rest assured whatever you were sent out there to learn you could learn even if it took twenty years for you to get through your head what it was. That's what I mean when I say it's extremely difficult to pinpoint. You know, strengths were given to you. And you know it wasn't necessarily. . . . I think most Blacks teach in parables or in a parallel, without being very, very verbal.

KT: When did you start to show your work, to present it to the public and sell your work?

GC: Well, basically with the [Philadelphia] Department of Recreation (and Philadelphia Art Museum) we used major recreational facilities to hang the Black artists' work, (be)cause they were not allowing Black artists to hang their work anywhere else. So we started creating places where we could hang our work as well to be appreciated. So therefore, that was the first "exposure" quote, unquote, to the community. And after I had been studying with Ben Britt, I guess, about four years, I walked in his studio one day, and he told me that arrangements had been made for me to have an exhibit at Cheyney State College. And I was ready to renege on it and said, "No, not me. I'm not ready for that."

He said, "You mean you're going to disappoint me, Gladys? You're not going to do it."

And I felt so bad. Again, this is a typical teaching of how the Blacks in Philadelphia at that time pushed you on and did not even bother with your insecurities. There were no psychological treatment or games. You do it and they had their own unique way of doing it. So from that day on the shows have been nonstop.

KT: You mentioned that there was no place for Black artists to hang their work. Again, for people who are unfamiliar and would think that the North would be a place where there was equal opportunity, can you explain a little bit of why Black artists were not being hung?

GC: Because they were Black. That answers that automatically. But basically I think what is a great example of that is Henry (O.) Tanner. Henry Tanner was originally from Philadelphia--and I stand corrected on this--but I believe his family moved (from)--it's either Pittsburgh or Harrisburg, I believe it was Pittsburgh. And

again I stand corrected on this, I believe he was the first Black to be accepted in Philadelphia Academy of (Fine) Art, which is one of the best (art) academies in the United States. He left to go to Europe--he took all of his paintings and put them in Hopson Reynolds' basement. Hopson Reynolds then was a Black judge. I think Evelyn [Mrs. Hopson Reynolds] was his aunt. He [Tanner] went to Europe. This was sometime in either the late '20s or early '30s. And he did very well in Europe. When the '60s came up and this civil rights came about, they were scratching to find Black artists. Because they needed them for, to meet all the civil rights bills. The paintings that he had left in his aunt's basement, they are the same paintings of Henry Tanner's that now are on loan all over the world for his shows. So other than Tanner, I can only speak of Philadelphia, but even in the museums in New York, you did not see Black artists' work. Because somehow or another they just thought that we couldn't paint. You saw, (as) you know, Phillis Wheatley for the writers, yes, but painters, no. And which is why Tuskegee established a Negro Hall of Fame because the Black artists weren't being accepted anywhere else, and so the doors began to open after '65.

KT: So then up until the time that you came to Hawai'i, your main energies were spent with the [Philadelphia] Department of Recreation and your artwork?

GC: All my energies, yes. (The Department of Recreation), precisely where it went. I was doing quite a bit of traveling through. I wanted to get to the seed. I was fortunate. Like I said, I had a strong background. I come from a family of educators. So I wanted to see for myself what I had heard. So I started by (a trip to) Africa, Haiti with the dance, Jamaica and all the islands in the Caribbean. And spent time with the people up in the hills. I could go to their churches, churches which were just four walls, benches, no minister, no choirs. People got up and they said what they had (to say). And it was so interesting to see how the growth of things had gone over the years. Like when I was in Africa, in the villages, they had the baobab tree. And they always had an auditor, or chief, of that community or the village. And they all assembled underneath the baobab tree. And they told stories, or they vented. And this was a form of church to them and then it would be singing. (The drums were played.)

Then, about three or four years afterwards, being in the hills in Jamaica, to see the men sitting down with their sitars and if someone felt like getting up and singing, they got up and they sang. If their chicken didn't lay enough eggs, they got up and they complained about it. And it was at that point that I realized why it was a particular kind of strength in a Black church. Time had just changed the stage for it, (social structure) had gone from a baobab tree to a homemade church, to an urban development, but within the walls it was the same thing. It was a unique form of group therapy without it being labeled as group therapy, as well as being able to hear the rhythms that was totally untouched by modern

technology. And it gave me as an artist a different scope. More so like some of the artists were those that were into being rebellious, shooting holes in the American flag, the Black Panthers' type of thing. And after I realized that, I just wanted to try to depict the strengths of our culture. In a unique way, that could convey a history without it being too oral. Of course, oral opinions have a way of disguising the truths. And I try very hard with my Black artwork. No truths are ever disguised. They're there for the viewer to see and I think this is an important means of communication because the painting can speak to the viewer, and the viewer himself can speak to the (painting). And they can walk away and they have a different concept of what they did when they first come (to view the painting). As I always say, lets [everyone] know that our people are about more than tap dancing and spitting watermelon seeds. And I think our (Black) art has a lot, our art and our culture has a lot of aesthetic values. And I think a lot of it is lost when they try to project it the way the academic says it must be done. Oral history (changes) time, it gets changed, revamped and revamped. The truth is eradicated and I just refuse to do it with my art (be)cause I want it to be a history, it's not oral but visual history, and I feel very adamantly about that.

KT: Okay, well, we're going to wrap it up today. Next time, we'll perhaps speak about a few of your favorite paintings and the truth that is in them or the strength and the history that is in them. And then you can share with us your experiences coming to Hawai'i and how that has affected your art and how your attitudes have changed.

GC: All right. I'll look forward.

KT: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-18-2-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Gladys E. Crampton (GC)

June 30, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is June 30, 1988. And I'm about to conduct an interview, a second interview with Gladys E. Crampton. We are at [in Honolulu] at her apartment. And we will be continuing our interview.

Gladys, today I thought that we could first speak about coming to Hawai'i, and how you have found life to be here in the Islands. And the second part of the interview we could talk about your philosophy of art. Unless you would rather speak first of your philosophy of art and then speak about coming to the Islands.

GC: Well, I arrived in the Islands in August of 1977. And what was it that you asked me about when I was . . .

KT: Yes, how it was that you came to the Islands, and how you found it when you came here, and what changes have you observed since you've been here.

GC: That could take about four tapes alone.

(Laughter)

KT: How did you come?

GC: I was sent here for health reasons. So hoping to eliminate some of the problems that I've had with health, my physician thought that I would have less problems here on the Islands than where I was.

KT: Because of the climate?

GC: Because of the warmer climate, yes.

KT: And then when you came here, what kinds of experiences did you meet with, both as a woman, and as a Black woman, and perhaps even thirdly, as an artist.

GC: You ask the questions that really could take hours to answer. But, it was a cultural exchange. I mean, it was a brand-new culture that

was completely opposite of that [in which] I had [been] born, raised, and bred in. So it was a big adjustment, learning the difference of another culture.

KT: And how did you notice these differences?

GC: People speaking a language that you don't know and it takes a while to figure it out, because people here are not as verbal as those from my culture. So I had a lot of trouble adjusting to that fact and learning how to understand it.

KT: So kind of the communication of silence or of spaces?

GC: I think it's just a different culture because [there are] so many varied cultures here from the South Pacific, from all the islands off of Japan and China, so you don't have one whole mass of people. Because the island is so unique in that way, it's just so many of a culture that was completely from the other side of the world that I had known. And so, it was learning how to adjust and to function in this culture.

KT: So when you first came, did you find the people open and friendly? Or did they seem suspicious? Or you have any observations in that area, the people here?

GC: No, like I said. I just noticed that they were less verbal than those from where I came from. No, I didn't have too many problems. In fact, I didn't have any problems.

KT: And at first you lived on the Windward side. Did you find that a different environment than living on the Honolulu side?

GC: Yes, I liked living on the other side because you're still very much in kin with nature. You have all the beauty where all the condominiums had not gone up yet, opposed to on this side of the island being nothing but cement all around all the time. And adjusting [to] living in a small place [apartment], I think that was one of the major adjustments to make.

KT: Was your artwork influenced by moving over here, would you say?

GC: Yes, and I think I had been over here for a while before I even began noticing [and] putting forth effort trying to learn to communicate and understand what the culture is about. I went and took some of the evening courses in Chinese brush painting, and the Academy of Arts is always one of my favorite places to go to look, and see, and observe. And I've never seen such a large collection of Asian art before. So between studying the brush strokes and learning it, it did influence my art. Because in the Western world of art, everything is done very much in detail, as the correct anatomy. Into detail, (as a) thread coming off of a suit. Like in the Renaissance period (this) is major--how you study art in the Western culture, so to speak. And over here, it's as the Chinese or

the Japanese call it, "The Spirit of the Brush." So, I began to learn to keep extracting. It was like reversing everything that had been taught to me all my life. Because like the culture here, like I said, they're not as verbal and I think the same thing reflects in their art because a few lines tell the whole story. So as a result, yes, it did, trying to figure it out, subtracting lines and creating balance, trying to apply the philosophy of the brush. And reading the Asian philosophies has helped me a lot with line and design.

KT: What about in the area of religion? Did you notice any particular differences here? Or miss anything that was at home that wasn't here?

GC: Oh, yes. I greatly miss the choirs in the Black churches, and hearing the old Negro spirituals. Being in Hawai'i has been a very rich cultural experience. But, however, it hasn't kept me from missing my roots. And hearing them sing, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." I remember the first time I went into a Buddhist temple and I saw (people getting) into chant(ing). And as I felt the energy go up, it was a solid energy. And I thought--as I saw that energy going up, as I heard them chanting, it was almost inside I felt, how can I say it, the vibrations, or the energies from the prayers. But then immediately, I flashback and think, this is the same way that I felt when I heard or do hear Mahalia Jackson singing, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." So, in that way it has been a cultural experience. It's been a learning experience. Totally.

KT: Of the changes that you've observed when you came here some twelve years ago, what would you say the most noticeable changes have been?

GC: In myself or just to the environment? I don't understand the question.

KT: Perhaps both. And that's an ambiguous question. Perhaps the changes external to you, and then also, secondly, the changes within you.

GC: I don't know how to answer the latter, so I think I'll just have to let that one pass over.

KT: Okay.

GC: I think likewise for the first one, other than you're on an island in the Pacific Ocean and it gives you a lot of time to think and go deep within yourself. And I think, the only way that question truthfully could be answered [is] if one saw my artwork and they saw the intensity of doing the African or the Black artwork, where(in) over here, it gets more into the quietness, and like I said, being surrounded by water, it's more of (my) spirit, more so than the high energy of my people.

KT: Let's move on to talking about your art. And perhaps you could speak a little bit about the philosophy behind your art and what

your art is about.

GC: Well, I like my African artwork, or any of my artwork, really, to give the viewer a glimpse of the grassroot or the human aspects of my artwork. We take it from Africa. My kinship to the race of man, and its association to different social environments. I really and truly feel as though as an artist, art has a responsibility for helping others to focus on new ideas and new experiences with concepts that reflect time. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And it's the time and the space in which I was born into. And I tried to reflect that in my work so I (try) to project my heritage, the progress of man, and to be able to transmit aesthetic experiences. And all of the paintings basically have come from my environment as well as outside of my environment. The social, the human, the scientific difference (of my people). And all these are controlling factors that I tried to depict in all of my artistic expression.

KT: You enjoyed painting with oils. Why?

GC: It's the feel, because you can mold it. If you---I paint on a solid base. I like to build my work up, to have meat, as it's called. And that way I feel as though I can just really mold in. To bring it together to say what I want the viewer to feel when they see it.

KT: And then what about these colors that you use? Especially in your art that is more ethnic, more African or Afro-American. I've noticed that your colors are so intense. Do you have anything to say about the use of color? I think that your use of color is pretty unique.

GC: Well, I think on the first part of the interview, you were asking me about those that influenced my life coming up in Philadelphia. And I think a great deal of the way that I apply and use colors was taught to me by Benjamin Britt of Philadelphia. When I was studying with Ben Britt, I just (have) a sensitivity to color. I think color reacts on the inner psyche of man. And so if you make it vibrant enough, then it has to hit the soul of the viewer. And like I said, I just have a sensitivity to color. I like color, I like nature, I like life. And to me, that's all what color represents.

KT: Have you felt any contrast with the intensity of colors in your painting and some of the more--the local painting here?

GC: Well, it depends on how you define local. I will answer that from the experience when I was taking the classes in Chinese brush painting. Yes, it's so delicate. It's like it's tissue-thin. And it's the softness. It's soft as the Japanese culture is, or the Chinese, their love and beauty of the elements. Like from the Tao. And I think it's beautifully projected. They're speaking of nature, but what would an African painting look like, if I'd use the fine, delicate painting of the Oriental brush? The spirit of the African is not of that. It's the vibrant energy. And it's the strength, so I can't use washy colors when I'm trying to project strength. I

personally have learned to really admire, respect the Japanese and the Chinese "Spirit of the Brush." I think it's absolutely beautiful and the color is beautiful (and soft). I enjoy seeing it.

KT: How do you go about choosing your subjects?

GC: Depends on what I have to say.

KT: And do you know ahead of time what you will have to say?

GC: I may have a mental concept of how I would like a piece (to be or) whatever statement that I want that piece to say. And then you just work and develop it. It's like working a New York [Times] crossword puzzle. You just stay at it until it's completed or the painting says what you want it to say. And that's sometime why I think that it takes a lot of guts in order to express your particular art form. But I like to do it so that it can historically be told and let it be determined to be the truth. So I think how the color is projected has an awful lot to do with it.

KT: Would you be willing to talk about two or three of your favorite paintings and speak of the significance of them and perhaps why you did them?

GC: Well, my favorite of any of the works that I've done thus far is a painting of the Reverend Earl H. Crampton. He was my favorite uncle--and the painting was done a year after he had died. And this reflects back to the question that you just asked about. What was it that you asked me a few minutes ago? Oh, about how do you know what you're going to paint. And when I had decided that I wanted to do a painting of (Uncle) Earl, while thinking about how I wanted to project what I loved and a lot of other people loved about the Reverend Earl H. Crampton, I tried to think of ways that people know him. He was always there to help people. He was (a sincere) minister. The minister played the part not only as someone who stood in the pulpit to talk to you, but it was to go in the homes in time of trouble to give prayer and comfort. Uncle Earl really did this. He really worked with the heart of the community. So I did a painting of him, of an old man who was having great sorrow and I think the painting shows all the emotion that he was feeling. Uncle Earl had beautiful hands, very expressive hands, and I wanted to figure out how to get the hand in. So I had (his) hand on the man's head, the man is crying. And you can feel that certain intensity and, again, that's with the color. Because it's the blueness of the clergy robe. The man that he is giving prayers to has washed-out, obvious work-from-the-soil (clothing), and then the background is of wood. So that's all solid earth. It gives the spiritual feeling. I remember when I showed it to his wife, Frances Crampton, I wanted to see if it had projected what I wanted it to. She looked at it and cried. You know, so I knew I had accomplished a mission. So, that's one of my favorite paintings.

I think my other favorite painting, it's in Philadelphia. Margaret

Gardner has it who is from the class of the old Black educators that I was talking about from Philadelphia. The name of the painting is "Sister Magnesia Glow," which is a picture of an old Negro slave sitting at the hearth in the White man's kitchen pondering pleasant thoughts. And it's just something very warm about that painting. So I think those two are about my favorite.

KT: How would you come up with the name "Magnesia Glow"?

GC: Are you sure you want to hear this story? (Chuckles)

KT: Yes.

GC: Strange you should ask me that because when that painting was accepted by Chestnut Hill Gallery in Philadelphia, someone asked me why--one of the curators, in fact, of the museum came up and asked me why the painting was named "Sister Magnesia Glow," and I kind of smiled. Well, as you well know, "Sister" is a name that's always applied to the older pillars of the church. Hence, the name "Sister." And "Magnesia," you know, are names the slavemasters gave their slaves when they didn't know who they were. They could no longer use their African names. So her masters had named her, "Magnesia." And "Glow," woman during that time worked in masa's kitchen everyday with every other Sunday and Thursdays off. For working twelve or fourteen hours a day, their total salary at the end of the week might be a dollar or a dollar fifty [$1.50]. And she would go home on the other side of the railroad tracks, and go to what we now call Goodwill Stores, or any of the thrift shops and buy things to help those in the neighborhood who (were in need). It was like here on the island they call it sharing, or 'ohana, or aloha. It was just love without it being given any particular name. So she would take all her wages and to help those that needed, those that were scuffling to send their children to Tuskegee, [Alabama], or [Nashville, Tennessee], or to Howard, or to Morgan. And she could come back and sit in that White man's kitchen and work very hard. The painting has a certain glow to it, a smile. Not a smile that would be equivalent to any Black face smile, but an inward smile. Smile of glowing because she had given God's spiritual love to someone. So, because of that, I combined all the names and named her "Sister Magnesia Glow."

KT: That's a wonderful story. What about--those two pieces that you mentioned represent or reflect certain aspects of Black culture and the Black community, Afro-American culture. What about some of your many paintings which reflects specifically the African culture? Can you speak of one of those?

GC: Yes, I think my favorite one in that area is called "Fear No Evil." "Fear No Evil" came about after my first trip to Africa. And I had a very good fortune of meeting an old wise man and during the whole time when I was in Dakar, the old men at night sit around playing checkers and drinking tea. Or just go down (by the sea and) meditate (there), because it's still and it brings peace and (one

can) reflect. And a lot of evenings I went to talk with him. And I guess when I came back home--home being the United States--and being in my studio just reflecting back to that whole first trip and the man. You can tell the classes of its society and decor by the clothes they wear. If it's blue, then you know it's from a tribe that dyed their clothes blue and, of course, anywhere in the world if you wear sparkling white all day long you can afford it. So he is wrapped in white clothing and he's holding a gold Coptic cross, which is one of the older crosses from Christianity. The whole background is a texture that made me call on every chemistry class I'd ever had in life (to project the feeling of) earth. Senegal is desert almost and it's dry. I was there just at the beginning of the drought. So I wanted that grainy feeling. I did it all with earth colors. So (when) the framing was done. I had been, like I said, painting and drawing since I was a kid and the art store wasn't too far from my home. I've been running in there since I was knee-high to a grasshopper, as they say. And when I came in with that painting, the owner of the shop was so proud, and he set it off with a beautiful bold museum frame, so. And the name of the painting is "Fear No Evil."

KT: And so the scene is of the man with the white [robe] holding the Coptic cross?

GC: Yes, and with his turban, which is done [with a] palette knife. And that's why I don't like to do--how can I call it--folksy art. As a rule, everybody says my art is strong. I don't have one thing to say against folksy art because folksy art is very much a part of our culture, but I think it takes like Ernie Barnes, or a Charles White, some of Tanner's pieces like holding the kid on (his) knee, playing the banjo (for the child). That's what I mean when I say "folksy art." But I feel as though with folksy art, since we live in an age of technology, that art is viewed outside of one particular community or outside the Black community [and] that other people, other cultures is a better word, may not always relate to it. So I always try to do it in a way that the human eye can find some part of truth, and enjoy that passage looking for the truth. And I feel as though when an artist is comfortable with their subject matter, then you have to strive to reduce it to its basic form. I guess at heart I'm just a perfectionist about my spirit. And that's what my spirit is all about. And I just want it to be an internal landscape of the past and the kinetics, and a stimulus, that is the deepest (of) my artist Black soul. I try to reflect the social needs and the aspirations of my own individual culture. The passing times goes so quickly in our changing world. So it makes me want to do statements that stirs up the intensity of what the human being feels inside with my brush and my color. Before it was color, but again now that reflects back to the change, when you asked me how moving here affect my art. Before I would only be, in a sense, only interested in the color (and form). But by studying Asian painting, I use (a different approach). I liked the idea of the flow, like I just said, because my art is about my spirit. (I am learning the eastern flow of the brush, combining the West and the East.)

KT: Is there any particular piece that you've done in oils that has been composed since you have been here that reflects the Islands in some way that you would tell me or speak to us a little bit about?

GC: I don't think so. None that I can recall off the top of my head. Oh, yes, when I first came over. I was living on the Kāne'ohe side. And as you asked me a few minutes ago, what did I feel, and what did I think about the island. I used to get the bus to come into Ala Moana Center from Kāne'ohe and I would look at the--I never have learned to pronounce this word correctly. The Ko'olaus?

KT: Ko'olaus.

GC: Ko'olaus, I have never been able to say that correctly. Anyway, coming over it was a beautiful ride from Kāne'ohe. I would always, particularly before, just before the bus goes into the Pali Highway. And I was beginning to notice (the beauty). Seems that kids just follow me anywhere in the world. And I (was) getting to meet some of the younger adults and their children. And finally, I wanted to do (a painting). I guess, I was really trying to figure out what O'ahu was about. And I did do a painting about the little kid whose father was Black and his mother was Japanese. So, and I had one thing that I did really enjoy about the island when I first came over it was seeing the rainbows. So, I did the kid what I thought, who was part of the land, who was a local kid, as I know now to say, with the rainbows on top of the. . . . What's the name of the mountains? Keo . . .

KT: Ko'olaus.

GC: Ko'olaus. I cannot say it. (Chuckles) And so yes, I had completely forgotten about that painting.

KT: What about your series of clowns? How did you get into your, almost your passion, but your interest in clowns? I know that you switched to watercolors for a while.

GC: I had to do that for health reasons. I had to be quiet, so it was something I could sit down (and do). [Watercolors] (were) my psychiatrist there for a while when I was pretty ill. What was it you asked me?

KT: About clowns.

GC: Ah. Why, I have always worked in some division of community work. And I seem to have a knack of being switched from one culture, one environment, one ethnic group and I started (doing clowns). . . . I moved into Buck's County and I was away from home really for the first time.

KT: Buck's County is Pennsylvania?

GC: Yes. So, I was meeting people in a totally different climate than I

had (lived) around before. So I guess basically I just started doing the clowns trying to figure out people's personalities.

KT: So in other words, your clowns reflect different people's personalities?

GC: To me.

KT: Can you talk a little bit about that?

GC: Clowns are rather personal to me and I'd rather really not go into it.

KT: Would you like to say anything about your meditation pieces, in terms of how you see those as affecting the public or the audience?

GC: Well, like I said earlier, we live in a very changing world and because of the complexity that it takes in order to survive mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, as you pointed out, my color with my art is very strong. And [by the] time everyone goes to their jobs and they do the computers and everything that's involved in high technology. The young adults now do not want to come home and look at some more people. That's the last thing that they want to see. They want a space that they can come into--again, no thinking, and I know it's the reflection of me living here on this island--something to create a space inside. You know, the homes on large hills, like they are on the East Coast. But limited space (here), people just want something they can sit down and relax on and I just start doing the pieces again. I was sick and couldn't get out of bed. So I tried with lines to express everything that basically had been an influence on me since I've been here, trying to make it really simple. So it was really an accident which I really enjoyed. And it provided meditation for me because it gave me a quietness within.

The Black art pieces, done by myself and other Black artists all over the United States, all that art that has come forward since the '60s, the African, Afro-American art has traveled around the world, literally. But the thought has changed, it's changed dramatically. So therefore, I try to---I try and I strive really hard to create art statements and try to use symbolism, something that will develop a universal understanding for people to get in[to] and to enjoy. By using art as a way of communication with the world and to yourself. So, I guess, I just try to do that in a unique (way with a) creative perception and it comes out in meditation pieces.

You know, for a long time I was doing my work in a context of history. That it would not only serve as a cultural exchange but would insist on other people knowing the rich Afro-American heritage available to all of us, which is very simple communication. I felt as though in this way, it relates the importance of one's culture to [a] historical and a political impact, and I think Black art helps to bring this realization, too. And it's an avenue to establish an

educational expression. And being here in Hawai'i, it addresses the East-West parallelism by identifying common areas of interests and similarities. So that people of diverse culture and ethnic and historical backgrounds can be brought together to share the ultimate experience of understanding each other through art. Well, mainly that's what my art is all about.

KT: When you speak of symbols, do you think that there are global symbols that people no matter where in the world would see a symbol and could get something out of it?

GC: Symbolism is universal. You can apply any philosophy that you want to, but basic sym . . .

KT: Symbolism.

GC: . . . symbolism is reflective. If you just take one pair of hands and cup them, and put nothing else on the paper, and you just have the lines of the hands, that's again what I was speaking of when I was saying the difference between eastern and western art. If you take hands and you don't have anything else on the paper but hands praying, I don't care what language you're speaking, wherever you are in the world, you know those hands are praying. That's symbolism. So I'm not talking about any deep mystical thing. It's the symbolism. It's just like Tamashiro's Food Market is a prime example. They have a crab hanging outside. And through(out) Japan, if you go through a business district or a shopping district and you see a crab, or if I saw a crab, or anyone from Africa saw a crab, you know one thing: inside that door they have something to do with crabs. So you know that you can get seafood in it. That's symbolism. Tamashiro's has the crab outside. It's their logo. And I'm sure it was brought from their grandparents in Japan. It's symbolism. Symbolism is universal. It's not limited to any one ethnic group.

KT: Did you do a picture of Tamashiro's Market?

GC: Yes, but I never did get around to finishing that.

KT: I notice that your art very often has more to do with people. That is to say, humans in it, than just a plain landscape, for example. . . . Is there a reason that you have focused more on the human aspect than on the nature aspect?

GC: I don't even attempt the nature aspect because I do not feel as though that I have the gift to be able to record on a canvas the (true) beauty of "Mama Nature." I just think it's just something very special about that. Maybe my hands (can't convey what I see in landscapes). (People) relate to earth too, with people I like the energy. I like what they have to record, to give a visual statement, that can give an impact on (the) times. All through history, the artists have always been the ones that make the political statements of the times. If I did a tree being barren

because it was the depression, if I (did) a piece of a man sitting down eating out of a garbage can and it's dated in 1931, then it reflects the times (in the painting) and you need a person to express (the concept). That's why I like people. Because they complete the set. They complete the stage. That's why I like to do either people or meditation pieces. And (sometime) I take the people (out of paintings or drawings to) allow the inner eye, or the third eye, (to provide a) space to think (with) their whole soul, their (own) spiritual journey.

So I think that art has its value, in a sense, because it's a premier temple of values. Just like you asked what was the transition from Philadelphia to Hawai'i. What I know best to talk about is the transformation from the African or my culture, or the deep rich South (stories) that I have heard from--Dr. Selma Burke, from the James Baldwins, from Reverend Leon Sullivan. (My) grandparents (who) came from Africa and, (they) talk(ed) about [the] South, it just gives a (feeling). And so that's what I have the most kind of energy to express. I know when I had the show over to the East-West Center, I thought it was very interesting on how the Chinese related to (my art). The subjects [were] all the African pieces. And I believe that they related to it more because they are people of the soil. They have been in the rice fields all their life. They know the pain. They know the turmoil. So they could relate. They weren't interested particularly because it was African art. It was the spiritual vibes that they got from it. I think this is important because it helps us to understand any personal psychological reactions which otherwise are always stimulated by some kind of verbal communication. And this way, I think, it helps to promote the understanding of the Afro-American art and its art form.

KT: I'm going to turn this tape over. We'll take a small pause here.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: We'll start with side two now.

The next question I'd like to ask you is to react to statements made by many critics, that Black art--including literature and painting and music--is protest art. Or that it is always geared towards social injustice. Do you have any comments on that?

GC: Could you direct that to me again because I really want to answer that.

KT: As a Black artist, do you feel that, number one, the only subjects that you can deal with are necessarily Black subjects, subjects that have to do with the Afro-American culture.

GC: Okay, let's put a stop there. Let's take them one at a time.

KT: Okay.

GC: Number one, they didn't allow us to really paint until in the '60s, and we had statements to make. Well, as you can ask me that question, I can see Dr. Selma Burke sitting in front of me saying, "Well, you know sometimes, Gladys, people make statements because they don't know what else to say." Really art determines the truth, which makes it art to begin with. You know as Picasso once said, "Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth." And I think basically that answers that all the way across. You know Black art suggests the truth. And more often than not, it decides what the viewer sees. And thus, it helps the viewer to see the essential culture behind the painting. And maybe those that made those statements had never been in and seen our culture.

KT: So would you say that your art, in particular, is art that would be protest art? You would be protesting against society or you would be . . .

GC: No . . .

KT: . . . demanding something?

GC: . . . I don't feel as though my Black art and any other Black artist in America. It's an ethnic perplexity . . .

KT: Perplexity.

GC: . . . (yes, perplexity and complexity), striving for human understanding in an art form. These are artists who have lived with that complexity and the social strife that they had to in order to become an artist. I think it's a form of Afro-American heritage that needs to be told whether anybody else sees it as inferior or primitive, really. I mean what can be more primitive than some of the pieces that Picasso did when he went to the villages in Africa and came out with cubism?

KT: Which could be seen as the utmost of sophistication.

GC: True.

KT: So when you paint, personally, it is more from a feeling of communication rather than a feeling of anger?

GC: Well, there's no anger in it at all. Because thoughts and times have changed dramatically since the era of time I am striving to do in creative expression. I'm just trying (to express) what others see in my Black art as well as Black artists, they're just trying to create and make an art statement. I, myself, I try to develop a universal understanding of my culture and its concept of the world that I and all other Black artists have lived in. (Be)cause

universally in communications, it's about using arts and science to help develop a medium of communications in the world in which we live today. And I, like I said, myself, and other Black artists try to do this in a unique, perceptive manner. And I think that goes (for all art forms), the Alvin Ailey dance troupes. (For example), when Alvin Ailey first started out, all he was doing was the rhythms of the African drums in our dance. Now, two of his lead dancers are from here on O'ahu. It's all about universal change. A man may see it (one) way because he has never lived in our world in which we were (and are) forced to live in. But when it became universal, we were making political Black statements. I don't think any Black artists made any more political art statements than any other artist did depicting the particular times of what was going on. [The] '60s, was the Black awareness period, the first time in the nineteenth century.

KT: Twentieth.

GC: In the twentieth century, rather, I'm sorry. In the twentieth century. So if all those truths had been hidden, I guess people did have something to say about it. Critics.

You know, I think that gives the audience a pleasant cup of history to drink. And I think anyone---if five people go see a work of art, I don't care what culture it came from and everyone's not going to have that same piece to say about art, which makes it an "art piece" because (it is) kind of versatile. There's something to say about it. Someone comes up and looks at a painting and walks off from it and has nothing to say, then the artist has mixed him up. (Be)cause basically what you're doing is establishing a communication between the viewer and the mind of the artist.

KT: I've noticed the great variety of themes. You mentioned in our first interview that you liked to portray such themes as strength and compassion. I also know from my own work with Black art that some artists focus mainly on anger and resistance and defiance, even. What do you think about that?

GC: I think that particular art that you're talking about came out, again, in the early '60s, such as the era of--see, you're more familiar with writers than I . . .

KT: Well, the Black Power era.

GC: The Black, okay, essentially, the Black Power era when the Black Panthers were strong. It was the first time in the twentieth century that Blacks could vent, express the anger that they felt, the anger from all the many things that there was to be angry about without going into any detail about their brothers having going to 'Nam [Vietnam] and what have you, and because so, yes, they did paintings burning the American flag. But it's arrived, like I said, as a political truth. Several of the paintings I'm thinking about now are in major museums. It's part, the earth, when you look at it

in reality, it's the only time in the twentieth century that Blacks were able to make any statement because they were the political platform. So because of the times, like I said, politics always gives the artists (subject matter). I don't care if they're black, white, pink, green or yellow. You can go through any era of time, the Renaissance. You can go through France. You can go through . . .

KT: Italy.

GC: Italy. You can come on the other side of the world and do China. Look at the artworks that came out of China during the Mao Tse-tung [era]. The T'ang Wars. So, you know, I get rather aggravated when I hear, "Well, only the Blacks are doing this," when every other ethnic group in history is [represented]. Because when you come down to it, really, that is the solid, the first time that, it's something just like, what can I say, American folk music, the Dixieland jazz. Now we have a period where it was Black art, so it gave something to the United States whether anybody is against the statements that were made. It gave a unique art form that was a recording from that period of history in the United States.

You know, it's a common ground. People sometimes just get angry when they have to deal with truth, basically. You know, and I think by understanding the art and to the extent of how it speaks of us, then it becomes the expression of one's soul. Of one's soul talking to the other. Then, as all those works are shown by all (Black) artists from all over, I feel as though it can begin to strengthen the bonds between all of us. And I believe then, and only then, can art begin to serve its true purpose as being an ambassador to the world. So, I think most Black art is art to the people. It's not necessarily that they're doing art for a collector to hang in his home. My art and any other Black artist coming through the '60s, they have recorded to the world and not to an individual gallery.

You know, they add adjectives to the word "art," such as Afro-American art, women's art, French art. Sometimes I feel as though we fall prey to all the negative preconceptions that are transmitted to us through current events. You know, the media, our own background. And then there is a danger that everybody just begins to feel as though they have to distinctly define our (Black) art form. But I feel as though if art is successful, many important cultural aspects can be conveyed in a nonthreatening way. Therefore, again, it promotes understanding and communication to different ethnic groups. Then, [for] people to point out that we're painting this because we're angry and it's not true. Even if they did say we're angry, we, like everybody else, have reasons to be angry. So why do we have to not come up with the truth?

KT: I think, unless you have some other particular angles of thought to give on art, and your art in particular, I'd like to close with a few words from you on how you see Blacks in Hawai'i, having lived here for the years that you have. Any impressions that you might

have in that area.

GC: I think all Blacks that come to Hawai'i, for each and every one, it's a new experience to those that come here, as well as those peoples of other ethnic groups and from the other side of the world. It's an adjustment period (for) every one, whatever your own individual period of growth (is) at that given time, you experience it, so I cannot speak for the other Blacks because I think as long as you [are] Black you have your own unique experience of what you have to learn to adjust to, to survive and be here.

KT: So those would be your final words?

GC: Yes, basically, because, like I feel as though it's much (more difficult for) the Black from the East Coast coming here. I think it's more adjustment [for] the Black from the East Coast coming here than opposed to a Black from the West Coast coming here because, basically, they've been living with Asians all their life. So it's, you know, it's two different worlds. So I think how a Black adjusts to living here depends on what part of the United States that you came from. So, since I'm from the East Coast, that's the only way that I can answer it. Therefore, my words are limited.

KT: Do you think people here are prejudiced?

GC: It's not prejudice as I know prejudice. I know prejudice as a Black-White situation. At first when I came here, I thought it was the most prejudiced place I had ever in my life been, and I have been one or two places. But after I was here for a while and understood the lay of the land, it's not prejudice against Blacks. Yes, the island's prejudiced, but it's not prejudice, a Black-White situation. The Chinese can't stand the Japanese, the Japanese can't stand this one. The Filipinos can't stand this. And if you try to figure out who didn't like who because of being prejudiced you'd be pretty miserable on this island. So silence is golden. You smile and shake your head and know that this too shall pass. (Chuckles) It's a unique form of prejudice. It's not, and like I said, as we know it, it's two different worlds. We're a thousand more and all encompassed on one small island so. . . .

I would like to see the [Honolulu] Academy [of Arts], maybe on Black History Month--we have quite a few very, very talented Black artists here on the island and now that we have Martin Luther King [Day] as a national holiday I think just as they have, the Academy has their major show every year, and every other ethnic group has some type of representation for their various holidays, and the island is expanding as it is expanding, I would love to see a (Black) show at the Academy, whatever way that it (could) be set up for Black History Month here on the island. (Be)cause like I said, we have some very good (Black artists on O'ahu). I'm not the only Black artist on this island. There are many Black artists and (they are) good. So I would like very much to see (Black representation at) the Academy, because there is not one piece of Black art in the

Academy. And it may not even have to be a Black artist from this island, but we have so many fabulous Black artists, Charles Smith, (Henry O.) Tanner and all those that I've (mentioned) before, I really do not understand why there is not a piece of Black art by a prominent Black artist. I do not understand.

KT: Well, hopefully that will change soon.

GC: Well, I don't think necessarily it's because of prejudice. I don't think it was a need for it. But what I'm saying is the need is here because more Blacks are coming into the island daily and I think that since it's such a multi-cultural, ethnic island that I feel as though that we have earned the right and it's just due that we have a piece to represent the (Black) artist, of our people hanging in the Academy.

KT: Thank you very much. We will end now.

GC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Oral Histories of African Americans

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
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